

THE HEADLESS MAN AND OTHERS: A CREATIVE REPORT

by

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B. A., Kansas State University, 1961

A MASTER'S REPORT

submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree

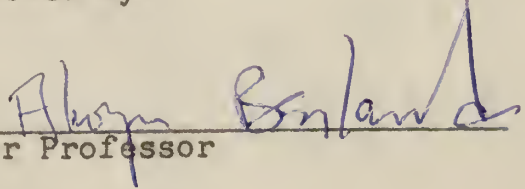
MASTER OF ARTS

Department of English

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

1963

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INTRODUCTION

The Headless Man and Others is a collection of four short stories which delineates the growth of an adolescent boy toward a mature relationship with his environment. In the title story of this series, its hero, Fletcher Forrester, arrives at a rationalization for the difficulty of the human condition--or at least the human condition as it seems to a sensitive, highly introverted, and self-conscious boy. And it is toward this single rationalization that the entire series tends. Fletcher's problem is, of course, a classic one: what does such a highly sensitive nature do when confronted with situations and individuals which prove to be either insidiously corrupting to personal integrity, painful merely to witness, or downright wicked?

In the first three stories, which I will consider as a unit, saving "The Headless Man" for more lengthy treatment, Fletcher Forrester goes through a number of initiations into various forms of evil as they exist in his most immediate environment. To each he comes innocent and unshorn, apparently with no experience from his earlier life. Indeed, judging by his impressions of the people he meets, virtually his only source of knowledge concerning life is the world of art. When the thirteen year old Fletcher sees the Ashburtons for the first time in "It's Not the Dying," "their heads [were] tilted at that thoughtful angle of visitors at art

galleries." Later, Mr. Ashburton's face reminds Fletcher "of a highly polished statue of white marble . . ." And yet later, "He felt as he watched them that he was the entire audience for two very accomplished actors." The same holds true of his reactions to the Crumps in "From Cinammon Candy." Mr. Crump's bent back makes him think of "a decrepit, impotent old Merlin . . ." When he speculates naively that he is responsible for that back, he remembers that "He had read a story once in which a wicked man--an ogre really--had lost control over another person's soul and had decayed because of the defeat." And Mrs. Crump floats by "like the white bust of Diana in his mythology book." Where is such a person to turn to find the facility for reading life? The answer is obvious: nowhere. He must simply wait his experiences out and hope that they aren't too crushing.

Basically, there are three distinct possibilities of evil expressed in the first three stories, each of a progressively more difficult kind to comprehend. First, there is the Ashburtons, come to grub money out of the old man, known as Uncle Will to Fletcher. But these are not simply greedy people; they are accomplished, refined, polished--representatives of the ideal which Fletcher's cultural background has taught him to respect. What should be a dead giveaway to the reader, then--the artificiality, the complete blandness of the Ashburtons--takes Fletcher in and causes him even to like them in an ambiguous way. As a contrast to Fletcher's reaction, note his grandmother's, which is instantly to bristle like "an

old bull dog trying to defend her last litter from a pack of wolves." The evidence against them is there, assuming that one has experience enough to read it properly. Ultimately, then, it is his own gullibility, born of innocence, that leads Fletcher to the full pain of the final scene. The death is anticlimactic, following as it does upon Fletcher's realization of the utter baseness possible to human motive. As Uncle Will had said, "It's not the dying" that is the source of the greatest pain.

For the Fletcher Forrester of "The Washed Hand" matters are considerably altered, however, for he has already tasted death and the brutality and ugliness that is likely to surround it. With this in his background, the killing of the chipmunk takes on a particular value: it is his first, direct involvement in the process of death. No longer is he trying to sit to one side as he had done in "It's Not the Dying": "he wished simply to sit and watch, and he resented being drawn from his seat at the edge of the stage into the play itself." Now he is the only actor, and his aloneness is emphasized by the feeling that is generated in the story that nothing is moving, everything is hanging in quiet suspension around him. But his involvement, though entirely personal, is nonetheless unconscious. He is not out to shoot a chipmunk. In his imagination he devitalizes the animal, seeing it "standing on its hind legs . . . as motionless as a tin can on a fence post." However, although he does not consciously will the death of the chipmunk, he nonetheless feels a deep sense of personal guilt

for it--a guilt which cannot be washed away with mud and water. So all that is left for Fletcher is to attempt to turn his back on it, but the "animal planted there" is likely to grow and multiply, as are all of the trying circumstances which he encounters.

The third story of the series invites a limited sort of comparison with the first in the nature of the initiation involved. In each case there is a pair of people--a husband and a wife--with whom Fletcher must cope. In "It's Not the Dying," however, the Ashburtons are the actors and Fletcher the bystander, the boy becoming involved only at the end when he tries to subdue Uncle Will's tormentor. "From Cinammon Candy" involves Fletcher--now Flip--much more directly: he becomes the central actor, not in the sense that he is in "The Washed Hand," but as one among several, who must try to comprehend human motive, both his and others'. But now there are all sorts of complicated things stirred in: the Crumps are not overtly and grandly wicked--Mr. Crump is a little pathetic as the "too old husband" and Mrs. Crump is a little pathetic as the too young wife who once had dreams of Hollywood; Flip is in love and has an ambiguous sexual longing for Mrs. Crump, which is complicated by his extreme self-consciousness. All of these factors make it considerably more difficult for Flip to see into the core of the problem confronting him.

And this problem is not, as Flip thinks throughout the story it will be, one simply of the moral question involved in going to bed with another man's wife or with any woman for that

matter. That is a factor only so long as he is still doing battle over it, specifically, and it is not that which finally turns him from Mrs. Crump in the final scene. Ultimately, his decision to leave is one far more basic: he simply says no to the strong pressures which would force him to yield his individual will. After all, he must admit to himself, the victory over the cinammon candy was a mighty small one, especially since it was not in any sense his own doing. When he imagines that old man Crump is pulling the string on his wife's finger, he sees the cinammon candy episode repeated, in large, and he must resist or pay with the forfeiture of his will.

In these first three stories, Fletcher is shown to be a naive, self-conscious, highly impressionable boy, who is forced to confront his existence and is pained by it. But the result of this pain is not dealt with at any great length. These experiences, and the others like them which were not written and must therefore be inferred, are the ingredients that have transformed Fletcher into the state in which he is found in "The Headless Man." No longer does he need to run to the world of art for his associations, and, except for the one crucial reference to the Ancient Mariner, he does not do so. He is still highly self-conscious--afraid that he will be mistaken for a queer, and over-sensitive about his lack of height. And he is so full of the Ashburtons and Crumps whom he has run up against that he sees them everywhere--he has become almost a misanthrope: he sees Goulard as a queer; he speaks of people variously as "monkey man," "some bloated bastard,"

"the blackheaded wonder," "a son-of-a-bitch," and so on. Literally everyone but the children on the merry-go-round are measured in these unsympathetic terms, whether they deserve them or not.

Further, his experience has forced him into a continual longing to remove himself, either physically, as he has done by going on the road, or by attempting somehow to lose his identity. It is this that idealizes the merry-go-round existence of the little children because "they rode in their tiny circle, millions of miles away . . ." And it is this that makes him enjoy the submersion of self which the Headless Man allows him: "All at once he felt as if he had been transported far away from everything and everyone, even himself--put aside into another world where the contact with the old was altogether one way. And he liked it."

But what Fletch has never stopped to consider is that he is viewing the people of his world in exactly the way that he always feared would be turned upon himself--with a hyper-critical eye toward the peculiar marks that make each individual one alone in his environment, with his own peculiar torments and satisfactions. So, at the same time he is trying to remove himself from the pain of exposing his real identity before the world, he secretly watches the people "file by as though they were passing in review behind a thin strip of dirty gauze bandage. And the best thing about it all was that they didn't have even the vaguest notion that he was peering out between the Headless Man's lapels." This view, though

safe, is of necessity distorted, not only by the shirt that clouds his vision but by his entire view of life, which life itself has forced upon him. In this sense the shirt becomes his view of life and the Headless Man his distorted, fabricated self, which he has adopted to mask his real self from the abuses of the world.

The basic intent of the story, then, is to show Fletch in the process of rejoining his self--the self which he fears and at the same time requires if he is to be able to exist as anything but a dehumanized, headless body. When, late in the story, he looks at the spectators with cleared eyes, he sees that "They had the same haunted look, as though they were always searching for something just out of reach, something that was always there but never seen, something that would scare the hell out of them if they ever caught the slightest most fleeting glimpse of it." This is, of course, Fletch's perception about his own condition at the beginning of the story when he was being haunted by Alby, the monkey man: "He would be standing there by the merry-go-round and feel something, like you're supposed to feel when a ghost slides by, and he'd look into the crowd in the midway and see the old man right off, just before he'd disappear." Afraid as he is to expose his self, Fletch sees in Alby an extension of that very freakishness which he thinks would make him one entirely alone, naked and defenseless before the world.

In the final scene, however, Fletch's defenses are pulled down, and he is forced to confront the condition of the freak.

What he discovers is of great consequence to him. At first violently humiliated, he is forced by Alby to face his persecutors, and he sees that Alby, in all his freakishness, is stronger than the mob, because they are also afraid of the freak in themselves, as he had been. So they aren't "sonsabitches" after all, but only "generals"--those people who never realize that somewhere buried behind all of their defenses there is an individual self which if permitted to escape would set them far apart from their fellows. Now, full of this realization, he can front them with his "magnificently scrawny chest" and invite them to see themselves in the "Goddam Mirror Man." He has assumed Alby's function and his potency, that is to say, his own function and potency.

Finally, Fletch is now able to look at the human condition with something other than misanthropy. His eyes have been cleared by his torment and his consequent realization and revitalization. Thus, when he says to Goulard, "It doesn't make any difference if you are a queer," he is giving voice to a newly uncovered sympathy. As well, he is expressing his new potency--the potency which allows him to look at others without seeing the fears and frustrations which lie in his own nature.

IT'S NOT THE DYING

When the pick-up left Edgerton, gaining speed and stabbing its lights far out into the blackness, Grandmother fell silent, gripping Fletcher's hand still more tightly. He answered with a light squeeze and then tried to forget that she was holding his hand at all. Watching the road ahead, he anticipated each rise and curve, however slight, proud that he remembered the road so well. Bugs materialized in the sticky night, leaping suddenly into the light and flashing toward the truck. They struck the hood and ricocheted high over the cab, and they smashed against the windshield, bursting out into lurid figures. Fletcher watched, fascinated.

"Fletcher . . . ," his grandmother said tentatively, drawing his name out softly.

The boy looked over at his grandmother, whose fleshy, heavily jowled face was pointed straight ahead. Beyond her, he could faintly make out his grandfather's lean profile in the light from the dash. It seemed to Fletcher that his grandfather was frowning, but he couldn't be certain because he always looked intense when he drove.

"Fletcher . . . There's something we've got to tell you," his grandmother said slowly, looking not at the boy but at the man by her side. "You remember Uncle Will, I'm sure," she said irrelevantly: Fletcher had written to them only a week earlier saying how anxious he was to see Uncle Will again. "He's

poorly, Fletcher."

"Poorly?" Fletcher said. "He's sick? Uncle Will? But that's not right! . . . What's wrong with him, Grams?" He put his right hand over his grandmother's hands, barely conscious of their chapped roughness.

"He had a heart attack, Fletcher." She finally looked at the boy, and it seemed to him that she was probing for something; exactly what it could be he didn't know, but she stopped, so he guessed maybe she had found it.

"It's not bad, is it, Grams? He is going to be all right?" He had heard of heart attacks, before, and he knew that some people died from them, but he knew Uncle Will too, and he had decided that he simply wasn't like most people.

"I don't know, Fletcher. That's in the hands of God."

"That means he won't get better, doesn't it?" he said.

"What your grandmother means is that a fellow just can't predict this kind of thing." Grandfather's voice was deep and hoarse. He had glanced at Fletcher, but he quickly shifted his eyes back to the road. He remained silent and intent while he steered the truck around a curve, then looked back at the boy. "You have to prepare yourself, Fletch. He'll look considerable down from when you last saw him."

Down? Fletcher could not understand. All of the people he had known who had died were already down, and he had supposed they had always been down, that maybe they were born down. Now, Uncle Will was a man of sixty, tall and straight, who always carried his head back with its huge shock of white

hair ruffled by the incessant breeze along the creek. He had been that way when Fletcher was younger, and he had been that way the previous summer when Fletcher was twelve.

"We wanted his family to be with him, but he said there wasn't any now," his grandmother said resignedly. "A body should have a family at times like these."

"Well, we can be his family," Fletcher said. And what else could he say? For there was that image of Uncle Will back again to trouble him as it had at odd moments during the past year. He had been chatting with him in his shack, or at least Uncle Will had been talking--about all of the people uprooted during the depression, so far as Fletcher could remember. That part was hazy, but what he could remember, what he couldn't forget, was Uncle Will's reaction to his question, "Where did you come from, Uncle Will? Was that why . . ." He had seemed to look at Fletcher, yet he hadn't looked at him. All expression, all emotion had drained from his face, leaving a cold, impenetrable mask, which had terrified the boy. So he never asked again. Now his grandmother seemed to confirm his year-long impression that Uncle Will's family had died, probably some horrible, unnatural death.

When Fletcher saw his grandparents' yard light, he wanted to tell his grandfather to stop, for heaven's sake, to turn from that place--from the house and the man entombed in it. The pickup pulled into the gravel driveway, jolted around behind the house and stopped. "Where is he, Grams?"

"He's in the bedroom off the front hall, Fletcher, the room below yours. I 'spect he's awake and anxious to see you."

Fletcher, who had pulled back on the door handle, stopped and let it fall slowly. "Uh . . . Grams," he began. But he couldn't let her think badly of him.

"Edna," his grandfather said, "maybe it'd be better if Fletcher went right on to bed. He must be pretty tired after the trip."

"Well, I just thought since Fletcher was . . ."

"Never mind. It's late and he can see him in the morning. That'll be plenty of time," Grandfather said. His taut lips smiled faintly at the boy. He swung his door open and the light flashed on in the cab.

Fletcher, helplessly exposed by the garish light, had to look away from his grandmother. "Yes, in the morning," he whispered and climbed out of the truck. He walked a few steps away from the house, the gravel pushing up through his sneakers. Pivoting slowly in the heavy night he made out shadowy but familiar shapes against the densely clouded night: the barn, the silo, the garage, the house--all mere silhouettes, ghost-like forms of objects intimately known. Fletcher inhaled deeply the acrid scent of dust and decaying ensilage and strode deliberately into the house.

Next morning after a late breakfast, Fletcher refused his grandmother's invitation to go to town for medicine. She nodded, with a flicker of a smile, when Fletcher said, "I decided last night that I'd visit Uncle Will, right after

breakfast."

She looked intently at him for a moment and then sputtered, "Oh my, I can't stand here the whole day through." She smoothed her blue and white checked dress over her pudgy hips. "Your grandfather'll be back about noon, Fletcher, and you can go out with him this afternoon." She kissed him on the forehead, and he allowed himself to be pressed against her full bosom. "It's so nice to have you back. We miss it when you're not here."

Left alone, Fletcher stood leaning against the stove, his fists jammed deep into the pockets of his new jeans. With the toe of his white tennis shoe he traced the pattern of the red, blue, and green interlocking squares on the linoleum. His mouth felt dry and puckered as he ran his tongue along the inside of his teeth, so he walked, springing high on his toes at each step, to the sink and ran himself a glass of water, slowly, carefully running half the stream into the glass and half out. He sipped at the water until he had swallowed half of it and poured the rest out. He paused with the glass suspended, decisively turned on the water, filled the glass, and strode quickly to the door of Uncle Will's room. He knocked softly and went in.

He was met in the semi-darkness by a strong odor of sickness--disinfected sickness--sickness which rolled over him in waves and made him feel like vomiting. He shuffled grudgingly toward the bed which stood at one side of a window, whose cream-colored shade admitted an unpleasant, muted half-light.

Stopping at the foot of the bed, he looked down. There, completely covered, save for the long, pale, ghostly oval of his face and one emaciated hand which was held out toward his, its long bony fingers curled stiffly, was Uncle Will.

"Hi," the boy said hoarsely. "I brought you some water." He rolled his eyes away and looked at the table lined with medicine: pills in squat bottles; greenish liquid in a tall bottle; a fat envelope with typing; a large glass pitcher full of water. "Oh, you have some." He shifted his eyes slowly back to the old face and noticed that the long, white hair had been carefully parted and combed back.

The mouth in the paper-white face opened. "Good morning, Fletcher. Come here," it whispered. The hand waved weakly at a chair by the bed.

Inching closer, Fletcher stared at the face, as though trying to make sure that it was Uncle Will after all. The hand from under the sheet took his, and he forced down the reaction that shivered through his body. The skin felt dry and scaly. As the face gained definition, horrible lines could be seen to be deeply drawn into it; but the eyes, shining from the wasted face, were unmistakable. There was Uncle Will's life, there and in the mouth that stretched out at the corners, crinkling the dry skin in his cheeks like tissue paper, in what the boy hoped was a smile.

"I was pretty tired last night, Uncle Will." He strained to meet the old man's stare, trying not to look at the bumpy sheet. Out of the corner of his eyes he could sense the one

unexposed arm lying across the body, dormant as death, and further down the bed, the feet, twitching. "But I came right after breakfast," he said hurriedly.

"I'm afraid I shan't be much company, Fletcher." His voice, though feeble and strained, had lost nothing of what his grandmother called the accent of the really cultured.

"Oh, that's okay." Fletcher slumped a little in the chair. "Can I get anything for you?"

"No . . . No . . . I'm all right. Is there anything that you should be doing for your grandparents?" Uncle Will's eyes turned from Fletcher toward the ceiling.

"Oh, no. I'll stay with you. Does it make you tired to talk?" Fletcher looked at the old man's blue-veined hand, which was still loosely holding his. He put his free hand cautiously over the top of it.

"I'm fine so long as I don't overdo."

Fletcher sensed that the feet under the white cover had stopped their agitated motion. The old man looked at the boy again, an easy smile lighting his pale face. They gazed at each other, and Fletcher began to see in the ashen remains the face he had known: the white eyebrows, which peaked peculiarly just over the corners of his eyes; the high protruding cheekbones, now almost puncturing his tightly drawn skin; the nearly circular ears which projected almost straight from his head.

"How was school this year, Fletcher?"

The question startled the boy. School seemed so far

removed from this hushed and isolated corner of the world. But he recalled that Uncle Will had tried last summer to brace up his flagging interest in studies, and that he had gone back to school actually anxious to learn. But after a month or two school had become a chore again. He considered the expectant face in front of him and said, "I liked it fine, Uncle Will."

The old man looked disappointed; his smile vanished and his eyelids sank slowly, opening again over eyes that were looking beyond Fletcher. He felt his hand gripped more tightly. "What was wrong with school?"

"Nothing, Uncle Will. I mean," he said, "it's not the same as when you tell me about all those things. You make them interesting. My teachers don't. It's just a bunch of junk to memorize, that's all."

"I'm sorry, Fletcher." The old man closed his eyes and lay quietly, the sheet rising and falling with the arm across his chest. "I'd better rest. I'm feeling tired. I'm afraid it doesn't take long now."

Fletcher released his hand with mingled regret and relief and watched it come to rest along the edge of the bed. "I'll come back later when you're stronger, Uncle Will."

In the living room Fletcher sat leafing through a magazine, looking absently at the pictures of combines and tractors and harrows, the pale image of the dying man lurking in the shadows of his mind. He laid the magazine down on the sofa beside him and leaned back, his hands interlocked behind his head. The old black-faced clock on the mantel over the fire-

place began tolling its delicate chime. It was ten. Rising, the boy went to the window, which faced the road, and stood gazing across the neatly trimmed yard.

Coming from the direction of town, a red car slowed and pulled into the driveway. Across the front door of the car, in large, white block-letters, were the words, "Rich's Taxi." The driver pointed to the house, nodded once, then again, and two people crawled out of the back, a tall skinny man with a slight stoop, and a short, chubby woman. The man handed something to the driver, and the taxi backed into the road and drove off toward Edgerton, leaving the two people standing several feet apart gazing impassively at the house, their heads tilted at that thoughtful angle of visitors at art galleries. They studied the house in stolid silence for what seemed minutes, until the tall, stooping man inclined his angular frame toward the woman and mouthed a few words, to which the woman responded by marching onto the front lawn, her short arms swinging freely at her sides. With three long strides the man fell in beside her, and they marched together, in step, across the grass to the front porch, where Fletcher lost sight of them.

When the bell rang Fletcher had the sensation that he had never heard its raucous voice before, and as he reached for the knob, he realized that it was true: no one had ever come through that door, not in all the time he had stayed with his grandparents. When he yanked at the stubborn door, he felt, for a brief instant, that he should yell through the heavy,

windowless wood, commanding the strange visitors to leave and use the back door. But then it was too late, and it didn't matter after all, not after his eyes had traveled up the elongated torso to the immobile face which made Fletcher think of a highly polished statue of white marble which had sprouted clumps of jet-black hair.

"Hello, Fletcher, are your grandparents at home?" the woman asked, low and smooth, almost at his ear, startling Fletcher. He had lost track of her in his fascination with the marble face.

"Oh, no, no, no," he said, flustered, and tore his gaze away and shifted it to the woman, who was almost close enough to lean over and peck him on the cheek. "They're out." Her eyes met his from under her heavy black eyelashes. He had never seen eyelashes so long and heavy, and it seemed as though she had given up trying to hold them open under their weight, for they hung lazily, half closed. "May I help you?" he asked, and watched as she pursed her lips and raised one fine line of an eyebrow.

"Perhaps," she said. "Would you be so good as to let us come in and sit down? The hotel, you know--it's not the best." She brushed by him into the hall, shifting her eyes from one object to another, like a hen myopically looking for seeds to peck.

"Fletcher, we're terribly sorry. We haven't introduced ourselves. I am William Ashburton and this is my wife, Myrtle," the man said in a glassy monotone. Both Mr. and Mrs.

Ashburton froze and stared expectantly at Fletcher, who looked from one to the other, waiting for them to say something further. "Ah, then . . . You don't know who we are?" Mr. Ashburton chuckled and rubbed his hands together. He stepped gingerly over the threshold and eased the ponderous door closed.

"No, Sir," Fletcher said. "You're brand new to me."

"Hah! That is grand, Fletcher," Mr. Ashburton said, and patted him on the back.

"May we sit in the living room?" Mrs. Ashburton said as she strolled into the living room, her hands clasped in front of her.

"Oh, sure," Fletcher said. "They won't be long." He hastened into the room and held a chair, which she sagged into, with a deep sigh expressive of immense relief. Walking on the balls of his feet, Fletcher crossed to the sofa and sat on its edge, the hard line pressing uncomfortably against his buttocks.

"Please relax, Fletcher. There is certainly no need to be formal with us," Mr. Ashburton said, leaning against the side of the upright piano next to his wife, his legs crossed on the floor. With two bony fingers he drew a single cigarette from the pocket of his white shirt and placed it precisely in the center of his outthrust lips. Taking a wooden match from his pants pocket, he struck it with his thumbnail, waited for it to flare out, and lit the cigarette. Smoke began to drift from his nostrils in grey, ebbing wisps.

"When will they be back?" Mrs. Ashburton breathed. She crossed her legs and leaned toward Fletcher, exposing a large white patch of flabby thigh.

"Uh . . . Not long. Maybe an hour," he said. He felt as he watched them that he was the entire audience for two very accomplished actors. He liked the sensation. "Grandfather's in the field, and Grandmother's in town after some medicine," he said, settling back on the sofa.

"Medicine?" Mr. Ashburton loosely pushed his lanky frame from the piano and assumed a stance next to his wife's chair, his long, thin left hand coming lightly to rest on her shoulder, with the informal stiffness of the family portrait. "Is that for my father, Fletcher?"

"No, it's for Uncle Will," Fletcher said. "The medicine's for Uncle Will." He stared at Mr. Ashburton, wondering if he had been dumped at the wrong place.

"Uncle Will!" Mrs. Ashburton stretched her double chin taut as she looked up at her husband's face. She began to smile broadly but stopped. "Fletcher, your Uncle Will is my husband's father, William Ashburton, Sr."

"But that's not right," Fletcher said. He rose suddenly from the sofa. "He doesn't have any family." If they were still acting, he would like to be told; he wished simply to sit and watch, and he resented being drawn from his seat at the edge of the stage into the play itself. He stood shakily, looking at the posed Ashburtons.

"Yes, Fletcher, he does," the woman said. "It pains us that he could have forgotten us so completely as not to mention us even to you." Her voice broke a trifle. She bowed her head, and Fletcher felt sorry that he had said anything. He gazed at the top of her frowzy head. The lean white hand lifted stiffly from her shoulder and mechanically stroked her hair.

"Father deserted us, Fletcher, deserted us without a word, many years ago. One day he was there with his children"--he motioned with his free hand to himself and his wife--"and the next, gone, leaving an unimaginable void in our lives." As he talked nothing in his face moved but his lips, as though his mouth operated by wires pulled somewhere inside his smooth, sculptured head.

"Are you really his family?" Fletcher asked incredulously, advancing half way across the room toward them. "I thought you were dead or something."

Mr. Ashburton removed his hand from his wife's head and drew himself up, almost to attention. "As you can see we are certainly very much alive." His wife looked up again, smiling. "But perhaps, as you seem to indicate, we are no longer so in my father's eyes."

"Well, William, I said that he would forget us when he left. I said so." She nodded a single, abrupt nod at Fletcher. "I put it to you, Fletcher," she said petulantly, her heavy eyelashes working up and down slowly. "How would you feel if you were to return from the war--with a new bride--and move into your father's home, upon his invitation, mind, and then,

just like that," she snapped her fingers with a flourish, "after only seven months he were to vanish?"

Fletcher could not imagine, but he supposed it would be terrible, what with the war and the bride and the home and all the rest. But, and he said, "Uncle Will never did anything wrong." They didn't answer, except with stifled laughter, like he used whenever he didn't really have any laughter to stifle, but wanted to make someone feel small. They made him feel small.

He was relieved when he heard the back door slam. "That's Grandmother now," he said. "Grandma," he yelled. "We're in the living room."

"We?" her high-pitched voice yelled back, followed by the dull, rapid thud of blocky low-heeled shoes coming down the hall. She appeared in the doorway and smiled brightly at her guests, primly smoothing her white hair in back.

"This is Uncle Will's son and his wife," he said. "My grandmother."

"How do you do?" the Ashburtons said together, bowing slightly.

Grandmother stood transfixed, her smile washing away in a flood, her whole body stiffening into an awful rigidity. Standing there in the doorway with her feet braced slightly apart, her little, chubby hands clenched into fists, and her entire face set into a hard, unyielding expression of stubborn resistance and hatred. She looked like an old bull dog trying to defend her last litter from a pack of wolves.

"Fletcher," she said, "leave us. Go see Uncle Will." The command crackled in the taut air.

He glanced guardedly at the Ashburtons who were frozen into the tableau of the old family portrait, glittering and perfectly controlled. He was flustered and confused. He had understood little that had happened since he arrived in Edgerton, but before now he had been able to withhold judgment, at least until the Ashburtons had announced that they were the family which should have been dead. He felt ashamed for his grandmother's reaction, but he could not say whether it was because of her inhospitality to the grieving family or because she had been able to see something dirty beneath the shiny surface of the Ashburtons--something he had missed.

"Fletcher!"

The sharpness of her voice startled him. "Yes'm," he mumbled, and quickly fled the room, unable to look again either at the Ashburtons or at his grandmother.

He crossed the hall and put his hand on the doorknob to Uncle Will's room, pausing with the hope of hearing a final word. No one spoke, so he stepped into Uncle Will's room.

He looked at the bed and his breath caught. Uncle Will was sitting up, propped against the head of the bed, his eyes thrown wide in a look of surprise and terror which seemed to deepen every line in the forehead and cheeks of his ghastly face. He stared hard at Fletcher, his bony horror of a sunken chest, exposed by his unbuttoned pajamas, rapidly rising and

falling, his breath rasping into the close, soupy air of the room.

"What's wrong, Uncle Will?" the boy asked frantically, moving hastily to his side. "What's wrong?"

And still the old man stared as though to sear the boy with the naked flame of some terrifying perception. Then he blinked, once, twice, in rapid succession, and released the tight grip with which he had been holding the undersheet. "It's not the dying, Fletcher . . . not the dying." He shook his head mournfully.

"You're not going to die?" Fletcher leaned over the bed to make it easier to hear the old man's faint, tired voice.

"They're here. I heard them," Uncle Will said. "I didn't know they knew. I tried not to let them . . . You'll have to do something for me, Fletcher."

"Sure, Uncle Will, anything," he said anxiously. As he bent closer he could feel Uncle Will's hot, dry breath on his ear.

"In the shack, in my desk in the right-hand drawer" He paused, breathing harder. "A bank book in a white envelope . . . Bring it, please."

Fifteen minutes later Fletcher reentered the house, panting heavily, the white envelope clutched in his right hand. He was anxious to get back to Uncle Will, to understand why he had been asked to carry that little book with "Spoford Savings and Loan Association" gilded on its cardboard cover.

He approached the door to Uncle Will's room and stopped

abruptly. It stood, not as he had left it, but wide open. A fractured rectangle of light streamed across the floor and up the wall. Uncertainly he walked into the room. The dazzling scene which confronted him gave the impression of a harsh, melodramatic unreality, and he had the sickening sensation that his entrance had hurled him into the middle of the action. They were all there, frozen in bold relief by the glaring bare bulb: his grandmother slumped on a chair in the far corner, gazing at him as though she had been crushed by a vastly superior force; Uncle Will, still propped upright on the bed, his eyes lingering exhaustedly on Fletcher; and the Ashburtons. They stared coldly at Fletcher from either side of the bed, the woman with impatient, foot-tapping composure, the man with the same white, inscrutable, unwrinkled countenance gleaming beneath the bulb.

Fletcher held up the envelope, and Uncle Will nodded stiffly, motioning for him to bring it to him. Fletcher glanced back at Mr. Ashburton, whose hand was extended rigidly, his eyes fixed immovably on the envelope.

"If you please, Boy, let me see that." Mr. Ashburton's harsh, metallic voice cut the oppressive air.

"But . . . ," he began, and that single weak negation was all he could muster. He looked back at Uncle Will, imploringly, but the old man's face was expressionless and dull.

"Boy, the envelope! I want the envelope, please." Mr. Ashburton took one step toward him and brought his heels together with a resounding click.

Fletcher glanced down at the white envelope, quickly handed it to Mr. Ashburton, and retreated to his grandmother's corner. He put his arm around her pitiful, sagging shoulders and felt her lean against him.

Mrs. Ashburton waddled to her husband's side where she peered around his arm at the tiny book. Fletcher could not see her face, but Mr. Ashburton's was vividly clear. When he had leafed through most of the book, he looked down at the old man, who was staring blankly toward the door. "Well," he said, his voice glossy and burnished, "it would seem that my prince of a father has been lying." He gazed steadily at the old man. Mr. Ashburton lifted the book again and turned to the last page. He looked and looked and the brittle, shining surface of his face began to crack, first around the eyes, then across the forehead, then in lines shooting out from his thin lips, until it shattered and spewed its contents into the foul air.

"You God damned son-of-a-bitch!" he exploded. "What's the meaning of this?" He waved the book before his father's face, but Uncle Will's eyes had closed and he wouldn't look at it. "Don't shut your miserable eyes when I'm talking." He grabbed the old man by the jaw and shook his head. "How could you spend it all, for Christ's sake?" He shook harder.

Mrs. Ashburton touched his arm lightly and said, in a timid whisper, "Now, William, surely there's a better way." He released Uncle Will's jaw and smashed her face with a vicious stroke of his forearm.

After his first stunned shock, Fletcher dashed at Mr. Ashburton. He began beating on the long back with his blind, ineffectual fists. Suddenly, he felt his feet leave the floor, two powerful hands crushing his sides, and he flew, smashing against the wall and crumbling to the floor. He opened his eyes, preparing for another onslaught, but Mr. Ashburton was almost out of the door, dragging his wife after him. His grandmother was leaning over him, whimpering softly.

When he finally did stand up he looked at the figure which had slumped over and lay curled on the bed, its long white hair hanging over the edge. And Fletcher knew--even before he helped Grandmother roll him onto his back; the emaciated chest had stopped its labored heaving and Uncle Will's face had settled into a placidity perfect and final.

THE WASHED HAND

Stealthily Fletcher stalked through the brush along the creek, his brief, skinny legs easing down on each foot. A twig crunched dully and he frowned with disappointment. His grandfather's old polished shotgun cradled in his arm, he looked like an Indian scout, horseless, miles in front of the wagon train. The blistering August sun reflected languidly from the slow, turbid stream to his right, but he seemed unaffected by the soggy heat which hung in quiet suspension around him.

At the clearing he stopped warily. Freckles wrinkling together, the slight boy's squinted eyes peered at the woods on the other side, beyond Uncle Will's run-down shack and the weed-ravaged vegetable garden. He looked around soberly and said in an awed whisper, "It sure has changed." Cautiously he shifted the gun so that he held it in both hands diagonally across his T-shirted chest, ready for anything a scout might meet if he were to cross a clearing with a run-down shack and enter a forest. Suddenly he broke and ran, his body low to the ground, his concentrated face set toward the woods. He zig-zagged elusively and dived behind the first tree he came to, flattening his back against the rough bark. "Made it," he breathed with relief. Cautiously he peered around the tree. Nothing moved. So he turned and ran into the woods, darting erratically from tree to tree, like a water bug skimming the surface of a listless stream.

Finally out of sight of the clearing, he stopped and leaned against a tree, as though he had finally eluded whatever enemy had been threatening him. Thrusting his right hand into the pocket of his faded blue jeans he extracted the single forbidden shotgun shell which he held up for examination, like some unique fossil or precious gem. He tossed it into the air and caught it with satisfaction and studied its tubular regularity. Finally, he brought the gun up and slid back the bolt, inserted the shell carefully and jammed the bolt forward and down.

His eyes casting about, he walked slowly over the springy ground, occasionally bending to pick up some object, to study it, and with a shake of the head to throw it back to earth, the shotgun casually balanced the whole while in his right hand. Overhead from a tree not five yards in front of him, came a squeaky chattering. He looked up and there standing on its hind legs was a chipmunk as motionless as a tin can on a fence post.

Slowly, with labored caution, the boy lowered his left hand and grasped the shiny stock of the shotgun. He pushed the safety noiselessly off with his thumb and eased the gun to his shoulder, pressed his cheek against the stock and squinted down the barrel, his left eye tightly closed. He drew his finger back. As though fascinated by the progress of its own destruction the chipmunk, perched patiently on the limb, waited for the boy to finish. Then it was done; reverberating fatally,

the shot was fired and the chipmunk flew from the limb like a smashed can from a riddled fence post and fell limply to the ground. A terrified bird creeched off through the passive air.

The boy stood motionless, the gun poised just off his shoulder. His jaw fell open, and his dark brown brows pushed down, transforming his face into an expression of vacant disbelief. He stared, gun poised, face set, at the bloody hunk of fur on the ground beyond the tree, and then began to move, almost to float, across the intervening distance.

Standing over the mangled pelt, he looked down, the shotgun clenched tightly in front of him. His white hands opened, dropping the gun beside the chipmunk, and then came loosely to his sides. Limply he fell to his knees and bent his head down toward the dead animal, as though he were unsure whether it was dead, or whether it had actually been the blast from his weapon that had torn it so. Sinking back on his heels he began to shake his head quizzically. Then he bent over again, picking up a stick, and turned the chipmunk over gingerly to reveal the gutted interior, gory and nauseating.

Suddenly he seized the gun and poked and jabbed the barrel frenziedly into the ground, dirt and twigs and leaves showering into the air. He dug and dug, his breath hissing in and out through his clenched teeth. He struck a root and dug down to one side of it until he had a hole about four inches deep. Casting the gun away, he grabbed the chipmunk with his right hand and threw it into the hole, jumped up and hastily shoved

leaves and twigs and dirt over it until it was almost covered. Spinning around he ran and ran wildly out of the woods across the clearing into the brush.

And then he looked at his hand and stopped running after three final halting, jerky steps. In the hand was a wet glistening red stain which stretched across the palm in a wide band like a birth mark. He swiveled his head quickly away and balled his fist tightly, thrusting it away from his body as if it held a poisonous snake, and scurried down the bank to the river. Scooping up mud in his hands, he rubbed them viciously together beneath the placid brown water. When he removed them the redness was gone, but he shook his head and snatched up some more mud and went on rubbing. In a radiating semi-circle the riled mud spread slowly and became a gradually broadening line of muddier water which stretched until it finally diffused downstream.

The boy rose and climbed the bank listlessly and, his head lowered and his feet dragging through the brush, walked along the river, his back to the shack and the woods and the animal planted there.

FROM CINAMMON CANDY

When Flip heard the drapes at the rear of the store rustle, he turned on the counter stool and watched P. M. Crump's bent black form come into the room, a stiff hand brushing away the drape that clung to one shoulder. Seeing Flip, Crump stopped and glared at him, his grey face setting into the rigid dislike and distrust that Flip had become accustomed to over the last few years. Flip stared coolly back at him. "Good afternoon, Mr. Crump," he said, smiling and stripping away the last possible trace of insolence. Old man Crump snorted and shuffled around Flip without so much as a nod.

And it was a good afternoon. Play practice had gone well, and the coming of warm spring weather meant that he could walk home from school every day, stop at Crump's store, and see lovely Mrs. Crump possibly twice a week. He watched Mr. Crump as he stared out the front window into the street--a gnarled old man in flappy clothes. It was the back that did it, that made him look like a decrepit, impotent old Merlin--at least that had always been the picture Flip had of Merlin. Crump's back curved up from his scrawny waist until it jutted forward almost at right angles at the neck. With his sharp face always aimed at the ground, he looked to Flip like humiliated defeat itself.

Crump twisted his long neck around and glowered at Flip.
"She'll wait on you. Just be patient."

Flip was flustered. That had never happened before. Mrs. Crump was going to tend the store. And they were probably going to be alone. He looked quickly away from Crump to avoid giving away the pleasure which he knew was exposed all over his tight face. "That's okay. I'm in no hurry," he mumbled. Then, even more softly, "I can wait." He hoped, after he said it, that Crump hadn't heard.

Crump, turning toward the window, said, "I'll bet you can."

Flip was annoyed that he had heard. Old men just shouldn't be able to hear that well. But then he remembered that Crump wasn't as old as he had always seemed. It was the back that fooled you. Guardedly, he glanced at it again, as though there were something mysterious to be read in its twisted shape. But whatever was there didn't want to be read. So all he really knew was that if he were married to Mrs. Crump-- Mrs. Forrester she would be--his back wouldn't have bent like that.

And then, just as he began to toy with the dirty coffee cup in front of him, it struck him. He, Flip Forrester, had been responsible for the back. He had read a story once in which a wicked man--an ogre really--had lost control over another person's soul and had decayed because of the defeat. The gritty coffee swirled in the bottom of the cup. And it had been exactly the same after he had defeated old man Crump over the cinammon candy.

Crump turned again and yelled, "For Christ's sake, hurry, that bus will be here any time."

And from back inside the apartment Mrs. Crump's voice sent back, "In a minute," with that low husky quality that had attracted Flip so strongly since he had first fallen in love with her four years earlier.

But Crump didn't turn back to the window this time. Instead, he leaned against a display rack and stared thoughtfully at Flip, one long black shoe tapping impatiently on the grey tile floor. Flip watched him distrustfully. With that sinister out of the top of the eyes look, it almost seemed to the boy that Crump was preparing to try him again, perhaps to see if he hadn't lost control, to show that he could reestablish his supremacy with a mere snap of the fingers of his will.

But it was different now. Flip had defeated him once and he was sure that he could do it again. It amused him a little to think of how he would react to Crump's offer of one of those idiotic red cinammon candies now. He pictured Crump dipping his bony hand into the big round candy jar and extracting one of the luminescent candies. Then he would hold it up admiring it like a jewel, with a wrinkly pucker to his lips, and begin to beckon, his long knobby index finger crooking back and his watery eye sighting along it at Flip's right eye. Again and again it would curl until it would begin to draw Flip along like a puppet. That was how it had been until Hunk Mahoney had moved into the neighborhood and told him that that one "free" candy (and the five for a nickel he always bought) could

be seven for a nickel only four blocks away, straight and honest. But now he would go along all right, clear up to the last act of taking the candy, when he would say, "Mr. Crump, you're a fink," and laugh. And he did laugh, wryly.

"The bus is coming," Crump yelled. "Hurry, damn it."

"Sure, sure," Mrs. Crump's voice came back.

And then there was the sound of cloth--all kinds of cloth--the slithering drapes, her shiny smooth white dress, and the rhythmic whish whirr of her nylons.

Flip watched her in the mirror as her head and shoulders floated by, like the white bust of Diana in his mythology book. Her hair tumbled down her neck in bouncing loose curls and ringlets which arranged and rearranged themselves like a kaleidoscope. It was all Flip could do to keep from turning around to watch her, but he was afraid that if he turned he would have to watch as Crump touched his dry mealy old lips to her warm cheek. That would be too much.

He waited with growing tenseness, staring at the mirror, until he heard the bell jangle and the door slam. And now they were alone for the first time, and he felt almost as he had when he acted in his first play as a kid, not frightened exactly, but so nervous that everything inside seemed to be swollen to body-bursting size.

Slower now, the sound of clothing recrossed the room, and Flip watched Mrs. Crump's statuesque form slide behind the counter. Lethargically, she unbuttoned the top two buttons of her white dress and drew a deep breath, swelling under the

slick, translucent material. "There, that's better," she said. "Never did like anything tight around my neck." Her smile flashed wide, crinkling her upturned nose and exposing the dull, bluish spot where the filling showed through one of her upper teeth.

"Neither do I." And he reached up and unbuttoned the top button of his sport shirt.

"P. M.'s gone to buy some things. He won't be back for five days." She almost quit smiling and worked her face into a pout, her head lowered and her eyes looking out from beneath arched brows. "So I guess I'm the bar maid, if that's all right."

"Oh, sure," Flip said.

"I mean, P. M. knows so much more about making sundaes and sodas and things. I've been so sheltered."

"All I want's a coke," Flip said. "A ten cent coke."

"Good. That's easy." She bent down and began to chip at some ice in the cooler. Her full body quivered with each stroke. Tilting her head upward, she said, "How old're you now?"

"Sixteen." He concentrated on her unflinching green eyes, trying not to let his gaze stray to the open neck of her dress.

"When I was sixteen I wanted to be a movie star." She smiled wistfully and straightened up. "I had it all planned. I was going to go to Hollywood and be discovered. . . . That was twelve years ago."

Flip watched her fill the glass and place it in front of him. "Why didn't you go?" he asked.

"Oh, I don't know. One thing and another. Then I married P. M., and, well, after that there really never was much of a chance." Her face lighted again. "But that's enough of that. What are you going to be?"

"I don't know." And at that moment he didn't, except that almost anything would do so long as it allowed him to be near Mrs. Crump.

"You must have some idea, Flip."

That startled him. He hadn't been aware that she knew his name. All of those other times she had wandered mutely around the store, lightly touching one thing and another, never giving much of an indication that she knew anyone's name. It wasn't that she had been unfriendly, just quiet. He watched her glide around the counter and take a seat beside him.

"Why are you frowning?" she asked.

"Where, I mean, how did you find out my name?" He felt himself becoming flustered.

"Why, one of the other boys told me, Flip. Shouldn't I know it?" She blinked languorously.

"It's not my real name." And that seemed like a really stupid thing to say, but she was so close and her knee was almost touching his thigh.

"I know," she said. She slipped one leg up over the other, and her dress fell back.

He swiveled his head quickly toward the mirror where he could see only her head and shoulders reflected in profile. "Well, maybe I'd like to work with people. That's what I've always thought. With people."

"That would be nice," she breathed. "Can I have a teensy sip of your coke, Flip?" She leaned across in front of him, her bare arm snaking smoothly over his on the way, sending a tumbling, racing sensation through him.

And a bell ringing out of the darkness behind the curtain.

Mrs. Crump drew hurriedly back and pulled her dress down to her knee. "I've got another customer," she whispered. "Don't go away."

Looking around he saw Hunk Mahoney walking to the end of the counter, his eyes sliding insinuatingly from Mrs. Crump to Flip and back. And Mrs. Crump had turned and was looking at Hunk. Even though Flip couldn't see her face, he knew that she was admiring his over-large biceps which swelled under his tight T-shirt, the tough, square-lined face that was the all-American sort she could have been in pictures with. He felt himself crumble--skinny arms, thin, craggy face, everything about him a little short-changed and repulsive.

"Hiya, Flip," Hunk said, then looked back at Mrs. Crump.

Flip wanted to cut him, even if he was his best friend. But he didn't know why. "Hello, Hunk." Maybe it was the way he looked at Mrs. Crump. He wasn't really stupid about these things. He had seen the same looks on the hoods in the movies when they stared at the chicks. "How's it going?"

"O. K., Kid. Your mom gave me a message for you."

"What is it?"

"You're supposed to go home for supper." The older boy winked at Flip, one nostril of his squarish nose lifting.

"Your parents are going out."

"All right," he said and took a last look at Mrs. Crump's shapely back. He fished down, put a dime on the counter and walked toward the door, not sure whether he should feel relieved--for what he didn't quite know--or routed from the field.

He walked out of the store without looking back, knowing all the while that they were following with their critical eyes and smiling at his skinny body, screwy ears, giraffe neck, and all the rest that made up his incongruous appearance.

So Hunk dropped by Flip's house later that evening, about eight, after his parents had gone out. Flip had been sitting on the back porch reading a novel without too much success. Every time he would begin to get engrossed his mind would flash away to that business in Crump's store, and each time he would return to his book more confused than ever. Then Hunk was on the other side of the screen, illuminated dimly by the strained light from the porch. "Flip, can I come in? I gotta talk to you, Buddy," he said, breathlessly.

"Sure, come on in." Flip watched the door swing open. Several millers fluttered erratically in, released from their pattering assault at the screen, and danced to the bulb,

clicking against it and casting wierd flickery shadows over the porch.

When Hunk came into the bright light Flip noticed that something in his face had changed. "There's something I just gotta tell you, Flip."

"I know, that's what you said. Sit down, for crying out loud." Flip tried to be blasé, but he was sure that his impatience had given him away.

Hunk flopped into the lawn chair next to Flip and sat for several minutes without saying a word, so Flip forced himself to sweep his eyes back and forth across the page in front of him, scarcely looking up to answer Hunk's, "I'm sorry," with a curt, "For what?"

"For cutting in on your time, for Christ's sake."

"My time? What the hell are you talking about?" He finally put the book down, not even bothering to mark the page.

"Are your parents gone?" And seeing Flip's thoughtful nod he went on. "Your time with Mrs. Crump. She was just getting warmed up when I got there. And I mean warmed up."

Flip watched him shift his bulk in the chair, leaning forward and resting his elbows on his knees. He began to feel uneasy about the whole thing and wondered if he shouldn't tell Hunk to leave before he said anything really damaging. He asked, "What happened?"--the words that should never have been said. He knew that as soon as they were out, and he also knew that it was too late to do anything about them.

Because Hunk's face was becoming too eager. He looked possessed, like one of those television evangelists when the spirit of God is moving in him. His eyes closed and his mouth began to work convulsively, and then the words began. "You know I talk a lot, but you gotta believe this. It ain't no lie. When Mrs. Crump closed up she says to me, 'Hunk, why don't you come on back to my room. I got some things to show you.' And I mean she had some things to show me." Standing up, Hunk walked over to the screen door and stared out.

In the silence Flip felt himself sinking back into a region of confused and tumbling emotions. He drew his shoulders forward and tried to drive his head down between them. He wanted to cover his ears, but he remembered laughing once at the three monkeys and sat on his hands. Hunk pivoted slowly around to face him.

"Well I went back there and she pushed me down on this old sofa and told me to wait. I didn't know what was coming off. Then she put this record on and began to dance--you know, like them strippers at the carnival, the ones you wouldn't go in and see. Bumping and grinding around." Hunk slid his moist tongue slowly around his lips. He was breathing harder now. "Then she began to unbutton, real slow . . ."

As he talked he seemed to grow, to loom greater and greater over Flip, who could sense himself cowering back into the chair, in an attempt to escape the overwhelming sense of longing and shame that was pouring over him. Hunk talked on and on. His words ran together and blurred and tumbled over

one another. Smells and feels and sounds and sights whirled together like the blades of a gaudy pinwheel, mixing, blending, flashing, too fast, too fast, and he felt himself spiraling dizzily back into a world of grey-green nausea. He shut his eyes tight and jammed his fingers into his ears.

Too late. He had heard, "She asked me to tell you to drop around tomorrow about closing time." And that was all she needed.

He felt his arm being shaken and released his ears. "Hey, Flip, you okay? Maybe I'd better go, huh?"

Flip stared up at him without speaking. He nodded his head. Hunk turned and walked out through the door and disappeared. Flip knew exactly what Hunk had done to him and it terrified him. There was really no way out of it now, at least no way he could see.

Nor had he found a way after lying awake practically the whole night and day-dreaming his way through school the next day. Instead, things had grown worse. All day Hunk had glanced warily at him, winking when he caught his eye, with what seemed to Flip to be a mixture of self-consciousness and morbid fascination. And Mrs. Crump, adorned by Hunk's description and Flip's imagination, had hovered all day like a ripe wind-danced fruit, delicious and only possibly poisonous--in danger of tumbling to earth if he didn't seize it soon. When he had tried to shut out the vision by pressing his thumb and forefinger tightly against his eyelids, it had only become more painfully vivid.

Then, too soon, too quickly, he was at the door, glancing in to see if the store was busy. Relieved, he saw no one but Mrs. Crump, who was polishing the top of the counter. Opening the door, he listened to the bell jangle in back and saw Mrs. Crump look up. A broad, flashy smile broke over her face, punctuated by a lazy wink. "Why, hello, Flip, I thought you might come," huskily, far back in her throat.

"Roddy," she said, "you'll have to go so I can close up."

Momentarily bewildered, Flip finally noticed the little boy who was leafing through a comic book behind the magazine rack--a boy of almost impossibly small proportions, with large, buggy eyes, magnified by thick glasses. He looked at Mrs. Crump with a pained expression and said in a whiny voice, "But, I'm only half-way."

"I'm sorry," Mrs. Crump said. "It's closing time."

"Well, what about him?" He thrust his tiny thumb toward Flip. "Can't I wait until he leaves?"

"No, you can't. Now leave."

"Oh, all right." He put the comic book down, gave Flip a dirty look and rushed by him to the door. "It just ain't fair," he threw back and slammed out.

And the trouble for Flip was that he knew the boy had been right to ask what about him. So he was annoyed at Mrs. Crump when he turned back to see her laughing at the boy she had driven from the store, her head cast back and her body quivering with delight. But as he watched her his annoyance began

to droop, then to melt and flow away, leaving in its place a renewed swelling of ambiguous longing.

"Wait a second and I'll close up," she said and walked toward Flip. He lowered his eyes. On she came, right at him, her spikes clicking against the tile floor, her hips swaying back and forth smoothly, one white-shoed foot placed precisely in front of the other as though she were trying to walk a very narrow line. And always the sound of cloth in motion, crinkling whishing whirring. Right up to him. Then he felt her hand take his chin gently and lift his eyes to meet hers. They danced and sparkled--bright green shot through with little yellow lines, all converging on the deep black pupils.

When she had closed up she started toward the back of the store, with no apparent attention to Flip. He felt as though he had been left stranded, forgotten, as he watched her body move away from him. And he was drawn silently after her, toward the curtains at the rear of the store, through them into a small foyer, and beyond into the living room, always with his eyes on her round swaying buttocks. He recognized the room from bits of remembered description--the sofa against the far wall, where Hunk and she, where they . . . He licked his lips and noticed that his breathing had quickened. He tried consciously to slow it down. One in, one out, one in . . . The record player on top of the card table next to him, where she was bending to put on a record, her shoes already kicked under the table. A lamp next to the portrait on the wall--the portrait of Crump himself. Hunk hadn't told him about that. It

was a large photograph, in subdued tones of grey and black, and the eyes were captured perfectly as they burned into the room. He turned away and looked out of the window at the bare brick wall across the alley. But he knew that the old man was still staring at the back of his head.

Empty scratches, then tinny music began to scrape into the room in waltz time, loud at first, then subdued like the music in rest rooms. A hand grasped his arm and guided him to the sofa. He sat down woodenly and tried to brace himself, always vaguely aware of the hazy shape hanging on the wall to his left, just at the periphery of his vision--the face of the scrawny, too-old husband.

Whose wife, whose beautiful full-bodied wife was beginning to dance. Her face had changed--the lower jaw hung a little slack, the lips quivered, the eyes were barely open, the cheeks flushed redder. She moved slowly in front of him--hips in constant motion, swiveling, bumping, swaying--undoing the buttons down the front of her dress, always with her gaze fastened steadily on the boy. With a swish the dress slipped from her shoulders and fell down rushing down to the floor. She stepped lightly over it.

Flip pressed himself back into the sofa as she took the step toward him, her breasts jostling in the lacy brassiere. She bent to lift her half-slip. He wanted to look away, not to see the swelling breasts, the baring thigh, the stockings slithering along her legs to the floor. But his eyes remained on her voluptuous figure. The slip came off. Near, near, she

came, padding on bare feet with naked white skin glistening painfully. He squinted his eyes and rubbed his temples with two trembling fingers, swallowed with difficulty, crossed his legs. She reached slowly up behind her, fumbled and quickly whisked away the brassiere, swelling out into the room with pink-capped whiteness.

And then a step, two steps, not toward, but away, with slow sliding feet and a dip of her knees which set her breasts dancing. Eyes nearly closed and hands extended. And one hand being raised, with the index finger crooking slowly back, once, twice.

As though by levitation he rose from the sofa and stumbled after her smooth body, drawn by the inviting finger, the motioning finger. But troubled by something far off in another world. Only an undefined feeling without form or substance. Hazy, misty, always hidden behind the throbbing desire which drew him toward her as she began to turn back toward the sofa.

And then it was there, vividly, it was there, breaking through and tumbling over him. Staring at him over her shoulder was Crump's portrait in grey and black--Crump--as though he were pulling the string on her finger as it beckoned on. His stumbling progress stopped and he stood quivering like an arrested arrow. He met Crump's eyes as steadily as he could, fighting against the blurring in his own and the heat which burned painfully inside of him. The body stopped in front of him. But still the finger, more slowly now, beckoned on.

"Flip, Baby, come to me," her voice coaxed. "You need me, Lover."

He looked at her involuntarily and she began to move toward the sofa. But he remained where he was, fighting the urge to follow with a stubborn resistance born of intense pride. He could not lose control. He could not surrender. She--he--had had him again for a minute.

Then she began to move slowly toward him, until she was standing against him, rubbing her soft deep body over him and whispering in his ear, "Baby, please, I need you."

He couldn't let them. "You don't need me," he yelled.

"Your body, Baby, your body."

"You can't," he said. "I won't." The words burned and pained in his throat.

"Won't you?" she said and began fumbling with his shirt buttons.

Flip stiffened, grabbed her hand, and thrust it away from his chest. "No, no! I tell you, I won't."

The motion of her body against him ceased and he could feel her go limp. "No, I guess you won't," she said quietly.

"I have to go." He moved clumsily toward the door, afraid to look back at Mrs. Crump. "Good-bye," he said. "I'm sorry." He stumbled through the store and let himself out.

THE HEADLESS MAN

Fletch stood with his hand on the lever, lost in the flying spectacle of freedom and exhilaration. The little kids flashed by waving to beat the band and shouting like they had left the world behind. Up and down they rode, a blur of extravagant color blended with the wheezy fake calliope which bellowed at the heart of the merry-go-round. One more minute, he thought. One more minute won't hurt Goulard's stingy soul. So on they rode in their tiny circle, millions of miles away from the waiting parents who grinned outside the circle of rope. And another minute and another, until he had to turn it off with a yank at the lever like a goddam executioner.

He sat down on the edge of the idle merry-go-round for a cigarette. Two hours he had been at it and still no sign of that odd-ball with the monkey walk--some bloated bastard from town had called him Alby. Alby who? he had asked. Alby nothing, the guy had said. He was supposed to be some kind of weather prophet and madman supreme. During Fletch's first three nights on the carny job he hadn't been able to lose him. He would be standing there by the merry-go-round and feel something, like you're supposed to feel when a ghost slides by, and he'd look into the crowd in the midway and see the old man right off, just before he'd disappear. At first he figured Alby was with the carny, but Goulard, who had never even seen him, wanted it to be understood that he was not in the habit of

hiring loonies and cranks. Well, Fletch figured he could put up with anything for a few days, and in about two more he'd have enough money to move on.

Behind him, he could hear the kids clambering onto the merry-go-round, and then, from the other side, "Forrester, come over here." It was Goulard, always on the watch.

Fletch climbed onto the platform, crossed between the horses, and circled the center column, picking up an occasional bit of trash on the way so he could bug Goulard with his slowness without getting in trouble for it. The manager was standing bent over one of the horses, a gaudy dappled job--they were all females, he couldn't help but notice. He wasn't sure how they procreated, but he guessed since they never caught each other it didn't really make any difference. Goulard was inspecting her ear, in which there was a deep bloodless nick. "One of my babies is hurt," he said, looking at Fletch as if he were personally responsible.

"Don't look at me, Mr. Goulard. I didn't do it." He looked into the manager's watery blue eyes, which tried to meet his but ended up looking away as usual. Chicken livered, Fletch thought. Seven inches taller than I am and he can't even meet my eyes.

Goulard was staring off toward the ferris wheel, which rotated lazily against the starless night sky. He smiled a slight thin-lipped smile and brushed his straight blonde hair back along the side of his head. Fletch stared at his face--he always tried to meet people's eyes when he was talking to

them. It was something he had forced himself to do when he found out that it gave him an advantage. Then the lips quivered and opened. "You don't like your job very well, do you?"

"It's bread," Fletch said, "And that's what I'm here for."

"Then why don't you do it right?" The softness and apparent lack of interest chilled the boy more than a good full-throated bawling out ever could. "Is it not good enough for your university mind?" Only then did the manager look back, briefly, as if to calculate the effect he was having.

"What did I do wrong?" Fletch asked, staring hard.

"The ride lasts five minutes. I have taken the liberty of timing the last three--each lasted almost nine minutes. So you are costing us money, Forrester."

Fletch angrily threw away the few bits of trash he had been holding. "Does it hurt you so much?" he asked and prepared to leave. But a strange movement over by the rifle range caught his eye. It was Alby the monkey man, seen in a fleeting glimpse before he disappeared into the milling crowd. Fletch looked up and down the midway to try to see where he had gone, but so far as he could tell Alby had just evaporated. It was uncanny the way he always managed to do it.

"You must learn responsibility, Forrester, responsibility. All I am asking is that you time the ride a little more carefully. Is that so much?" He looked at Fletch with an expression of great patience and toleration, the kind that usually comes when you turn the other cheek.

"Quite a bit," Fletch answered, scanning the crowd in search of the monkey man. The guy gave him the creeps and he knew he would feel better if he could just keep him in sight.

When he finally gave up and looked back at Goulard he found the manager studying him with what looked like an insinuating gaze. He should never have let his guard down. "So you don't like your job," Goulard said thoughtfully, his index finger going up alongside his nose. "Then perhaps I am prepared to make you a proposition which will please you a little better--if you are qualified."

So it was finally coming. He only hoped he could get his pay this time. He had already been driven out of two jobs by queers. "No thanks, Mr. Goulard." What really bothered him was that he seemed to look like queer bait. It always had, ever since he had found out that there was such a thing.

"I think you misunderstand me, Forrester." His fingers began to drum nervously on the horse's head. "Have you ever done any acting in that school of yours?"

Fletch decided to hear him out and said, "Yes. I've always acted, ever since I can remember."

Goulard bowed his head, his lips puckering. "Then I have a problem that you might be able to help me with." Scanning up and down Fletch's frame, he asked, "How tall are you?"

"Five seven."

"Good. Perfect. You see, one of my performers came down with tonsillitis last night and had to go to the hospital, and I

had decided to cancel the act because I couldn't find anyone short enough."

"I'm flattered," Fletch said wryly. "What do I have to do?"

"It'll be worth ten extra dollars a night for you," Goulard said evasively, his eyes shifting around the midway like a fettered bird's. "Otherwise we'll just have to do without the act."

"But what's the job?"

"If you want the money all you have to do is be the Headless Man in the Hall of Horribles."

"A freak," Fletch said flatly.

"Well, yes, if you want to call it that, but not really. And no one will be able to recognize you anyway." He looked sidewise at Fletch as though he half expected the boy to slug him.

And there he was again, scampering toward the ferris wheel, his hands nearly sweeping the ground, his bald head poked clear out in front as though he were following a scent. He ducked behind the ticket booth, and peered back around at the two men on the merry-go-round.

"Why the hell won't he leave me alone?" Fletch asked, looking back at Goulard.

"Who?"

"Alby what's his name. He's been haunting me ever since I got here." Fletch looked back toward the ticket booth, but Alby had already vanished.

"I don't know anything about it. Now, do you want the job?"

Fletch thought about it for a moment. Ordinarily he would have said a quick no to a deal like that, but there was something in it that pleased him. He supposed it spoke to his sense of the theatrical, and what qualms he had were for the most part salved by the beautiful anonymity of being the Headless Man. "Sure, Mr. Goulard," he said, "It sounds like fun."

"Fine. I'll send someone around to relieve you right away."

Fletch walked back across the full merry-go-round and jumped down on the other side. Quince, the ticket seller, waved at him and he pulled the lever. Slowly the merry-go-round picked up speed until it was whirling by gaily. And suddenly, just as he was going to turn, he felt a light tap on his shoulder that made him gasp. He wheeled around and found himself faced squarely by Alby for the first time. His wrinkled, withered old face was twisted up and looked slantwise into Fletch's, his eyes glittering like some beardless Ancient Mariner. Slowly, a twisted, arthritic hand lifted to his forehead in an awful parody of a salute. "Hello, General," he said in a breaking voice. He shuffled closer until he was almost standing against Fletch and peered up into his face, as though he were trying to pierce the surface and see within. Fletch felt his forearm clutched tightly, almost desperately. Twice

the toothless gums beat, and the tongue rolled thickly around the cracked lips. "But you don't look like a general. You look like a freak."

"I'm not a freak," Fletch said, trying to draw back and to tear his eyes away from the overpowering attraction of the old man's. He couldn't do it. He couldn't look away, and his arm was held so tightly he couldn't muster enough strength to yank it free.

"Aren't you? I think I read it in your eyes. They're haunted." Alby let go and drew slowly away until he was standing against the rope. "Be a freak," he said. "Be a freak."

"No, leave me alone, damn it," Fletch yelled at him, but he had ducked under the rope and disappeared.

When Fletch stepped into the dressing tent behind the Hall of Horribles ten minutes later, he found Goulard standing alongside what Fletch took to be the torso of the Headless Man. "Take off your shirt and sit down here, Forrester." Goulard tapped impatiently on the back of a straight chair. "We'll have you fixed in a minute."

Fletch felt pretty naked sitting there on the chair in front of Goulard. He had the feeling, all of the time Goulard was fussing around the Headless Man, that he was sizing Fletch up for the make. So when Goulard patted him on the shoulder and told him to sit forward, he cringed away from the touch of the soft hand.

"Now, here's how it works," Goulard said, bringing the

Headless Man around in front of Fletch. "You have to go in through this opening in back." He spread the back flaps of the contraption, and Fletch could see inside. All it was was an oversized shirt and coat with a frame to support the phony shoulders.

"Is that all there is to it?" he asked, a little incredulous. "How do I see?"

"You'll see well enough through the shirt. We'll have you front-lighted, so no one will know you're in there."

And in he went, slipping his arms down into the bulky sleeves of the bright red coat. "Hey, it's nice in here. How do I look?"

"Headless," Goulard said without humor. "And you don't have to shout."

"Sorry." All at once he felt as if he had been transported far away from everything and everyone, even himself--put aside into another world where the contact with the old was altogether one way. And he liked it.

Still more he liked it when the Headless Man was up there on the platform in full view of the crowd of people. Covertly, he watched them file by as though they were passing in review behind a thin strip of dirty gauze bandage. And the best thing about it all was that they didn't have even the vaguest notion that he was peering out between the Headless Man's lapels. Besides, even if they did suspect someone was there, they couldn't possibly guess that it was Fletcher Forrester.

He smiled with satisfaction and listened to the vibration

of the goddam milking machine cups that pulsated up above the shoulders of the Headless Man. They were supposed to be pumping food and air into him, and probably something crazy to take the place of brain--instant nerves or something. He began to form an elaborate picture in his mind--a picture of a prodigal milking machine that had spent years as an outcast, putting sustenance in rather than taking it out. One day, the poor wanderer tried to return to the barn, and at the door a big, fat, pompous milking machine was standing guard . . .

Through his bemused thoughts came a high, shrill male voice. "And now Ladies and Gentlemen, step right this way and see the one, the only, Headless Man west of the Mississippi. He can not see, he can not hear, he can not think, he has no nerves." Fletch heard the barker grunt as he climbed up onto the platform. "Look at him carefully, Ladies and Gentlemen, and think, that there but for the grace of God go you." When the barker came up close Fletch could see that he had to be almost fifty, with impossibly short legs for his body. But the really strange thing about him was that he had never lost his blackheads. He had them all over his stinking face. Then he was tapping with some kind of pointer on the shoulders, and saying, "Now, let me draw your attention to the apparatus mounted above his shoulders. Without these tubes he would die instantly--one for air intake, one for exhaust, one for food, and the last for certain supplementary needs." Up close like that the barker's blackheads looked about as wicked as any he'd seen--much worse than those he had as a kid that he felt

so self-conscious about. Jesus, he'd felt like going around with his face in a goddam bandage, and here's this bastard walking around almost on parade.

Down below he saw a big, husky guy in overalls separate himself from the crowd of spectators and approach the stage. Fletch watched him with curiosity as he stared up at the Headless Man with a spreading bovine grin on his face. "You cain't fool me, Mister," he drawled out, pointing toward the mechanism above the Headless Man. "Them's tit cups." A spontaneous chuckle bubbled out of the crowd. The country wit turned toward the crowd and then turned back toward the stage with an enormous grin on his face.

The blackheaded wonder ignored him and began to move off stage. So he was going to lose the spotlight, just as he was getting to enjoy it, and all because of some ignorant clod with one bit of esoteric knowledge to his whole miserable name. He glowered down at the farmer who was merging back into the general mob triumphantly, with his thumbs hooked into his hip pockets as if he thought he had just scored a magnificent victory of some kind. What a son-of-a-bitch.

A blurred movement across the tent--like every other, but not quite like any other--drew his eyes from the crowd in front of him. So he was returning. Fletch's breath caught at the sight of the monkey man scurrying across the dirt floor, arms akimbo and face uplifted. Not five yards from the platform he stopped and stared up at the Headless Man.

He broke into a huge grin and pumped up and down on his springy, flexed legs. Everyone turned around to watch the monkey's exhibition, and soon a circle of people had formed around him as he cavorted on the ground. Suddenly he stopped and began once again to approach, a corridor forming for him through the crowd. When he was standing against the platform, his gnarled hands curled over the planks, he shot his smouldering gaze with unerring accuracy through the shirt at Fletch's eyes.

The contact chilled Fletch and he tried not to move, but he could feel his body growing more tense, more cramped, until he had to shift his weight slightly and cross his legs. Beyond the monkey man, the crowd was building up, standing about five deep, and sending out shouts of "Lockit Alby," "Alby's tracking," "Go to it Alby." And Fletch knew that they were all for the monkey man.

"I thought so, I thought so," he yelled up at Fletch. He sprang up onto the platform and approached Fletch, chanting weirdly, "You are a freak, you are a freak, you are a freak," until he was standing next to the Headless Man, with his hand resting on its shoulder.

"Alby, go away," Fletch whispered, fear building up and a sudden wave of claustrophobia suffocating him. "Alby, get away, damn it." He felt a bony, gnarled old hand take his and pump it up and down rapidly. Two thin, but extraordinarily strong arms went around him--then up around the Headless Man's shoulders.

"Come with me," the old voice cracked out, and he felt his upper shoulders being tugged. The cups clattered to the floor. And Fletch found it harder and harder to breathe.

"Alby, Alby, stop it."

"Come with me. I know where you belong."

And then with a sudden tug the Headless Man fell forward, slid down Fletch's arms, and vanished, and Fletcher Forrester was sitting in its place exposed on the stage, naked from the waist up; and in the wave of catcalls and raucous laughter that followed, he experienced a surge of humiliation that made him feel as if his flesh had been stripped away and his nerves--every thought and emotion--had been laid bare for the whole world to jeer at and scorn. Desperately, he buried his head in his hands and tried to keep out the abuse that was pouring on him from the audience.

"God damn it, God damn it," he choked out hoarsely, and a painful burning came into his throat and eyes. He bit his palm to keep it back. It was just the same as always, no different, and it would never be any different.

Someone in the crowd yelled, "Which one's the freak?" Everyone laughed.

Nowhere to run this time. Trapped. Fletch tried in vain to cover his puny body and to keep away whatever it was that was pounding unmercifully just beneath his consciousness. He wasn't startled this time when he heard the hoarse old voice whispering, "Are you a freak?" softly at his ear. And in that moment with the old man at his ear and the crowd laughing up

at him, he knew what he was--one set apart, unable to crawl back--a freak. He twisted his head around so he could see the little old man's face. Alby smiled faintly and lifted his white eyebrows.

Nodding slowly, Fletch formed the mute, "Yes," with his dry mouth. "I'm a freak."

Then Fletch felt Alby grasp his arm gently and pull up on it, and he found himself standing against the fading abuse. "Generals," Alby said, jabbing his warped finger toward the spectators and fixing them with that same unblinking eye, and Fletch noticed that being in the path of that finger did something to them. The noise dampened and a few began to shift about uneasily, some even to leave. "Sonsabitches," Fletch said aloud, for everyone, but Alby would hear none of it and said, "Generals," almost sadly.

"Look at them, look at them before they leave." Alby was tugging relentlessly at Fletch's arm.

"I am," Fletch said.

"No. Look at them. Quickly, face them and look at them." Alby pulled Fletch around until he was directly facing the audience.

Fletch stared down at them without comprehension. They had grown silent now, the laughter burning down into cold, gray ashes. They shifted nervously and some more began to shuffle away toward Fletch's neighbors, the dwarf and the bearded lady. And then he saw it, what he had seen for years and never perceived. It was almost as if a film had been washed from his

eyes and he could see clearly for the first time. They had that same haunted look, as though they were always searching for something just out of reach, something that was always there but never seen, something that would scare the hell out of them if they ever caught the slightest, most fleeting glimpse of it.

And that something was in him now--he was potent. Steadily, he walked to the edge of the platform, watching them cower back from him as he came. No one moved away. It was almost as if they were afraid to turn their backs on him. Behind him he could hear Alby jumping up and down, laughing uproariously, and he chuckled softly himself, with a spontaneous yet subdued mirth that he hadn't experienced in years. At the edge he stopped and clasped his hands behind him, giving the spectators the full view of his magnificently scrawny chest. "Ladies and Gentlemen," he began softly, "Step right this way and see yourself in the Goddam Mirror Man." He spread his arms and tried to draw his stomach further in to exaggerate his lower ribs, like the Before Man in the Charles Atlas ad.

Then across the tent he could see Mr. Goulard running their way, waving frantically at them, "Get down, get down, you're ruining my show. Who is that man?" He was pointing straight at Alby.

Fletch motioned Alby to the front of the stage. "This is Alby, Mr. Goulard. Alby, this is Mr. Goulard."

"Hello, General," Alby said, cackling.

"Get the hell down from there, would you? You've made me

a laughing stock. I won't be able to use the Headless Man again." He crawled up onto the platform and began to advance on Alby, his soft little fists balled menacingly at his sides.

Fletch stepped between them and said, "You know, Mr. Goulard, it doesn't make any difference to me if you are a queer."

That stopped him cold. He looked incredulously at Fletch and bellowed, "Who's a queer?"

"I don't know," Fletch said, "It doesn't make any difference."

Goulard looked confused and deeply tormented. "Get down, please."

"Okay, Mr. Goulard. But let me tell you something--the Headless Man's all right. Don't kick him out of the show. No one will even care if he is a fraud." He walked over to the manager and shook his limp hand before Goulard knew what he was doing.

Goulard snatched his hand away and snorted. "What are you, Forrester, some kind of nut? Pick up your pay at the office and clear out. You're finished here."

"All right. But you don't have to pay me for the Headless Man bit."

"Don't worry," Goulard threw back. He jumped from the platform and started back across the tent.

When Fletch turned back to Alby he found the little man seated on the chair in the middle of the platform, grinning like mad. He seemed to be enjoying himself so much that Fletch

wondered if he'd ever get him to leave. "Come on, Alby, let's go. There's no point in trying to bug Mr. Goulard."

THE HEADLESS MAN AND OTHERS: A CREATIVE REPORT

by

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B. A., Kansas State University, 1961

AN ABSTRACT OF A MASTER'S REPORT

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of English

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

1963

Approved by:

Major Professor

THE ABSTRACT

The Headless Man and Others is a collection of four short stories depicting incidents in the life of Fletcher Forrester, as he approaches adulthood. Included are: "It's Not the Dying," "The Washed Hand," "From Cinammon Candy," and "The Headless Man." To the collection is added a short critical introduction, which traces Fletcher's development.

The central theme of the first three stories is the initiation of Fletcher Forrester into various forms of evil. In "It's Not the Dying" he is introduced to death for the first time and made to realize that the death which he feared so much is not so bad as the circumstance which attends it--the utter baseness of motive of Uncle Will's son and daughter-in-law. The killing of a chipmunk in "The Washed Hand" leads to Fletcher's realization that a sense of deep personal guilt cannot be erased by any easy outward act. The evil which Fletcher encounters in the third story, "From Cinammon Candy," is more difficult for the boy to understand. Eventually, however, he is made to see that the difficulty which going to bed with Mrs. Crump presents is not one of conventional morality; instead, he decides he cannot go on because it would cost too great a price--the utter surrender of his will.

In the final story, "The Headless Man," Fletcher reaches a rationalization for the difficulty of life which will allow him to face it with greater force and confidence. At the beginning of the story he reacts altogether negatively to the characters who people his environment: he sees them all as unpleasant deviates of some kind. At the end of the story, he has been made to realize that he himself is a freak, a deviate from the norm, and that, indeed, every man is such a freak. This discovery

allows him to accept his fellows with greater tolerance, but more important, he can now take strength in his newly discovered state because he sees that the very act of realizing his strangeness allows him to accept the conditions of his existence.